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# Recovering and Discovering Our Past: The African-American Experience in St. Petersburg

James Anthony Schnur

*Researchers interested in learning about St. Petersburg's rich African-American history can examine a variety of primary sources, archival materials, and scholarly publications available in local libraries. This bibliographic essay describes important research materials located in the Tampa Bay area for those interested in the African-American experience in St. Petersburg and southern Pinellas County.*

Although John Donaldson and Anna Germain became the first African Americans to settle along the lower Pinellas Peninsula, others had traveled through the region as early as the sixteenth century. Estevanico, a Moorish slave that accompanied the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition, arrived along the Pinellas coastline in April 1528 as one of the first Africans to explore lands of the present-day United States. Between Estevanico's arrival and the end of the American Civil War in 1865, a small number of Africans came to the region as itinerant fishers from Cuba and as "Black Seminoles" who lived as members of the Seminole tribe. While Odet Philippe did have a small number of slaves at his St. Helena plantation in the area of present-day Safety Harbor, the Tampa Bay region generally lacked the large farmsteads and plantations with slaves found in northern Florida and other areas of the Antebellum South and thus only a few slaves lived along the Pinellas Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

John Donaldson, a former slave from Alabama, came to the area near Lake Maggiore in 1868 to work with a homesteader named Louis Bell, Jr. He soon met Anna Germain, a mulatto who also worked on Bell's land. In time, Donaldson married Germain, they moved away from the Bell's property, and acquired a homestead of their own. Though other freedmen living in the South faced hostility during the Reconstruction and Bourbon eras of the late nineteenth century, Donaldson gained the respect of his white neighbors along the sparsely settled frontier because of his many agricultural talents. With the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888, other African American families arrived in lower Pinellas in search of opportunities. By the early 1900s, small settlements for blacks began to take shape.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers may wish to examine six general works to gain a chronological and historical framework of St. Petersburg and its African-American community. Raymond O. Arsenault's *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (originally published by Donning in 1988; re-released by the University Press of Florida in 1996) provides an excellent overview of the social history of the lower Pinellas Peninsula that places events in the larger context of American history. Although most of Enoch Douglas Davis's *On the Bethel Trail* recounts his personal memories of the civil rights movement, he also provides an overview of race relations throughout St. Petersburg's earlier history. Richly adorned with photographs, Sandra W. Rooks's *St. Petersburg, Florida* (released as part of Arcadia Publishing's Black America series in 2003) captures images of notable people and often-forgotten communities,

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<sup>1</sup> The Estevanico Society, based in Abilene, Texas, hopes to improve research and scholarship on Estevanico's travels. This organization maintains an Internet site at <http://www.estevanico.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk, Va.: Donning, 1988), 40.

such as the “Pepper Town” settlement established by black families who helped build the Orange Belt Railway. Evelyn Newman Phillips completed her doctorate in Anthropology at the University of South Florida (USF) in 1994. Her dissertation, “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Political Economy of Ethnicity among African Americans in St. Petersburg, Florida,” combines historical narrative and ethnographic research and includes a timeline of major events in St. Petersburg’s black community. Douglas Fleming’s “Toward Integration: The Course of Race Relations in St. Petersburg, 1868 to 1963,” synthesizes early studies—such as the writings of Walter P. Fuller—with government documents and newspaper research. The chronological format of Rick Baker’s *Mangroves to Major League* also offers researchers a reference tool that outlines local and regional events during their periods of interest.<sup>3</sup>

During the early years of St. Petersburg’s history, African Americans often disappeared from the ‘traditional historical record.’ Most early histories of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County either ignored or marginalized the area’s black residents. Though they might occasionally mention a notable “Negro” citizen, they rarely touched the social fabric that nurtured the community. For example, Karl H. Grismer’s 1924 *History of St. Petersburg, Historical and Biographical* devoted only a couple of paragraphs to the “negro (sic) settlement” of Cooper’s Quarters, a place where “property values remained low . . . with a court in the center where the negresses (sic) could wash their clothes.” Typical of the ‘Chamber-of-Commerce’ publications that defined the Boom Era, Grismer allocated nearly a third of his 1924 text for biographical vignettes of leading developers and entrepreneurs. His *Story of St. Petersburg*, published in 1948, included approximately three pages devoted to the history of blacks in St. Petersburg. In a section entitled, “The Colored People Get Jordan Park,” Grismer praised Donaldson for his hard work and thriftiness then noted that many blacks “drifted in” during the land booms of the 1910s and 1920s and soon “slum districts developed which were a disgrace to the community.” While early histories contained plenty of passages that praised the climate and amenities the Sunshine City had to offer, they offered little if any information about a very substantial part of the population—a group of people who could neither relax on the fabled green benches nor enjoy many of the city’s amenities during the Jim Crow era.<sup>4</sup>

If early historians ignored the African-American community, journalists did not perform much better in their stories written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many articles contained racially offensive terms and placed quotes by blacks in caricature. When

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<sup>3</sup> See Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, *op. cit.*; Sandra W. Rooks, *St. Petersburg, Florida*, Black America Series (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003); Enoch Douglas Davis, *On the Bethel Trail* (St. Petersburg: Valkyrie Press, 1979); Evelyn Newman Phillips, “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Political Economy of Ethnicity among African Americans in St. Petersburg, Florida,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Florida, 1994); Douglas L. Fleming, “Toward Integration: The Course of Race Relations in St. Petersburg, 1868 to 1963,” (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1973); and Rick Baker, *Mangroves to Major League: A Timeline of St. Petersburg, Florida (Prehistory to 2000 A.D.)* (St. Petersburg: Southern Heritage Press, 2000). Phillips’s dissertation and Fleming’s thesis are also available electronically through the Florida Heritage Collection of the State University System of Florida.

<sup>4</sup> Karl H. Grismer, *History of St. Petersburg, Historical and Biographical* (St. Petersburg: Tourist News Publishing Company, 1924), 124; Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg: The History of Lower Pinellas Peninsula and the Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948), 188-191.

John Constantine Williams stopped in Tampa in early February 1879 on his way from Detroit to his lands in lower Pinellas, he brought along a number of farm implements, including a “Sulky” cultivator. The local newspaper could not resist telling the story of “a darkie who was standing on the outskirts of the crowd” who snidely remarked that whites had “never thought of making a plow for the plowmen to ride on until the (blacks) were freed.”

Newspapers such as the *St. Petersburg Times* and *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* rarely mentioned African Americans in news stories before the 1930s unless a crime or other terrible event had occurred. In October 1939, the *Times* finally launched its weekly “Negro News Page”—distributed only in black neighborhoods—as a chronicle of school events, social gatherings, weddings, and other important happenings. From October 1948 until its demise in the 1960s, editors made this page a daily rather than weekly part of the paper. Although most of the news about African Americans remained segregated on that page during this period, researchers today can examine microfilm editions of the *St. Petersburg Times* to reconstruct events rarely noted or mentioned in the larger community. Before spending hours wading through microfilm, researchers should consult the “Florida Index,” a substantial card catalogue that indexes newspaper articles in the *Times* and *Independent*, found at the Main Library of the St. Petersburg Public Library system.<sup>5</sup>

Other newspapers add to the historical record ignored by the major newspapers of the region. The Tampa library of the University of South Florida owns a number of newspapers on microfilm that researchers should consult. These include: *Atlanta Daily World* (with USF Tampa having nearly complete coverage from December 1931 through June 1964, except for 1933), *Pittsburgh Courier* (USF Tampa owns 1911-1912, and 1923-2003 with a few gaps), and *Chicago Defender* (most of the period from 1909 to 1973, with some gaps, may be used at USF Tampa). Although published in distant cities, these papers often included columns highlighting events in Tampa and St. Petersburg. The papers also covered stories and offered editorial perspectives quite different from periodicals published for white readers. Closer to home, the *Florida Sentinel-Bulletin*, launched in December 1945, traced events in the Tampa Bay region (USF Tampa owns 1946-1955, and from 1958 forward with occasional gaps). Articles by Ruth Lambright—a teacher at Union Academy in Tarpon Springs—often appeared in a “Negro News Column” in the *Tarpon Springs Leader* in the early 1950s. Lambright and other contributors often described athletic competitions between Gibbs High School and its counterpart, Pinellas High School, as well as gatherings of black teachers and ministers throughout the county. Unfortunately, most early issues of *The Weekly Challenger*—a newspaper for African Americans launched in St. Petersburg in 1966—are no longer available except as occasional clippings in a variety of manuscript collections.<sup>6</sup>

R. L. Polk’s St. Petersburg city directories, available in many libraries in the area, also assist researchers hoping to learn about St. Petersburg’s African-American history. Historians often consult city directories, telephone books, property records, and various government documents to compensate for gaps in archival records, private manuscripts, oral history interviews, scholarly monographs, or other sources. Many early editions of these city directories used symbols such as “(c)” alongside individuals’ names to denote persons of color. From these listings, students can reconstruct entire city blocks of residences, learn the

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<sup>5</sup> *Sunland Tribune*, 8 February 1879, 1 March 1879.

<sup>6</sup> *The Weekly Challenger* does maintain a website at: <http://theweeklychallenger.com>.

names of the occupants of these homes, and get an understanding of the jobs available to African Americans in the Jim Crow era.

Since nearly all of the people with first-hand memories of the early days of St. Petersburg have passed away, researchers must examine scholarly articles, oral histories, seminar papers, and similar sources. For example, Jon Wilson—a longtime writer for the *St. Petersburg Times*—published an essay about a lynching that occurred during the early twentieth century. Student seminar papers, compiled as part of the Florida History Research Collection at USF St. Petersburg’s Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, also include rich scholarship based upon interviews, primary sources, and newspaper articles. Papers by Samuel Davis, Shelley Dietrich, and Evan Bennett traced African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. Ellen Babb, Heritage Village’s historian, examined the role of women in St. Petersburg’s African-American community during the Second World War, and compared employment opportunities for white and black women in Pinellas County during the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

A variety of publications and seminar papers examine the struggle to desegregate schools in Pinellas County. *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, a May 1954 decision by the U. S. Supreme Court, invalidated the “separate but equal” doctrine Southern schools had used to embrace racial segregation. Similar to many school districts, the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction tried to avoid litigation by improving black facilities. In 1962, the district released its *Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools*, a celebratory history that did an admirable job of including information about black schools in St. Petersburg. The district’s 1987 publication, *Tradition of Excellence*, described the challenges of integrating the public schools throughout Pinellas County. Darryl Paulson and Milly St. Julien authored an article in the *Tampa Bay History* journal that compared the experiences in Pinellas with those of Manatee County between the *Brown* decision and the 1971 federal court order mandating busing for desegregation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jon L. Wilson, “Days of Fear: A Lynching in St. Petersburg,” *Tampa Bay History* 5(2) (Fall/Winter 1983): 4-26; Ellen J. Babb, “‘A Community within a Community’: African-American Women in St. Petersburg during World War II,” *Tampa Bay History* 17 (1) (Spring/Summer 1995): 34-47; Ellen J. Babb, “Work Wanted—Female: Women and Work in Pinellas County in the 1950s,” *Tampa Bay History* 14(2) (Fall/Winter 1992): 30-46; Ellen J. Babb, “Women and War: St. Petersburg Women during World War II,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 73(1) (July 1994): 43-61. See the following papers in the Florida History Research Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, USF St. Petersburg: Samuel Davis, “The Black Community of St. Petersburg, 1920,” Paper #25; Samuel Davis, “The Same Deal: Blacks in St. Petersburg, the 1930s,” 1986, Paper #22; Shelley Dietrich, “Racial and Ethnic Relations in Early Twentieth Century St. Petersburg,” 1994, Paper #135; African-American Families in St. Petersburg: 1900-1920,” 1997, Paper #117.

<sup>8</sup> Pinellas County, Board of Public Instruction, *The Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools, Celebrating 50 Years of Educational Progress; Superintendent’s Semi-centennial Report, 1912-1962* (St. Petersburg: Modern Printing & Publishing, 1962); Patricia Perez Costrini, ed., *A Tradition of Excellence, Pinellas County Schools: 1912-1987* (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1987); Darryl Paulson and Milly St. Julien, “Desegregating Public Schools in Manatee and Pinellas Counties, 1954-1971,” *Tampa Bay History* 7(1) (Spring/Summer 1985): 30-41. See also: James A. Schnur, “Desegregation of Public Schools in Pinellas County, Florida,” *Tampa Bay History* 13(1) (Spring/Summer 1991): 26-43.

Seminar papers in USF St. Petersburg's Florida History Research Collection will assist scholars interested in school desegregation. Joan W. Schweickert described desegregation at Gibbs High School, while Jane E. Thompson compared experiences at Gibbs with those at Northeast High School between 1969 and 1973. Dennis Hans focused on Dixie Hollins High School, one of two secondary schools in lower Pinellas (Boca Ciega High School was the other) that suffered from a number of race riots that required intervention by the National Guard. David Bruce wrote about Gibbs Junior College, an institution opened on the Gibbs High School campus to discourage blacks from applying to St. Petersburg Junior College. Chris Sterner's research noted the peaceful integration of Florida Presbyterian (now Eckerd) College as well as controversies on the campus during the takeover of Brown Hall.<sup>9</sup>

The struggle to desegregate facilities included venues other than schools. Darryl Paulson's "Stay Out the Water's Fine" retraced the battle to desegregate swimming facilities. Other scholars have described the battle to integrate spring training facilities and seats at Al Lang Stadium. Student researchers have also studied the sit-in movements and protests to integrate movie theatres and stores (such as Webb's City), and have conducted interviews with notable leaders of the civil rights movement.<sup>10</sup>

Archival and manuscript collections at local repositories also document the struggle for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. Various episodes of *Pinellas Past*, an oral history program sponsored by the Pinellas County Historical Society since the early 1980s, include interviews with people who have participated in or researched the civil rights era in St. Petersburg. These videos reside at the Archives and Library at Heritage Village. The Special Collections Department of the USF Tampa library possesses important manuscript

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<sup>9</sup> See the following papers in the Florida History Research Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, USF St. Petersburg: Joan W. Schweickert, "Gibbs Senior High School Desegregation—A New Beginning?" 1993, Paper # 10; Jane E. Thompson, "Desegregation of Pinellas County: A Comparison of Gibbs and Northeast High Schools, 1969-1973," Paper #120; Dennis Hans, "Wasn't That a Time? The Desegregation of Dixie Hollins High School," Paper #44; David Bruce, "Gibbs Junior College," 1994, Paper #57; Chris S. Sterner, "The Civil Rights Movement at Florida Presbyterian College: A Small College Perspective, 1960 to 1970," 1994, Paper #35; and Chris S. Sterner, "An Evolution of Radicalism at Florida Presbyterian College: The Brown Hall Takeover," 1993, Paper #141.

<sup>10</sup> Darryl Paulson, "Stay Out the Water's Fine: Desegregating Municipal Swimming Facilities in St. Petersburg, Florida," *Tampa Bay History* 4(2) (Fall/Winter 1982): 6-19. For a discussion of attempts to eliminate segregation in spring training facilities, see: Frank Hoffman's chapter, "From Jackie to Elvis, from Selma to St. Petersburg: The Desegregation of Spring Training" in: Edward J. Rielly, ed., *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond*, Contemporary Sports Issues Series (New York: Haworth, 2003), and Kevin McCarthy, *Baseball in Florida* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1996). See the following papers in the Florida History Research Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, USF St. Petersburg: Ragnar Sigurdsson, "The Sit-Ins and the Theatre Protests in St. Petersburg, 1960-1963," 1988, Paper #18; Robert P. Baker, "The Sunshine Mystique: St. Petersburg and the Sit-In Movement," 1994, Paper #60; Ross Hancock, "Webb's City Protest: NAACP v. Webb's City, 1960," 1997, Paper #72; Felicia Davis, "Rev. Enoch Davis and the Civil Rights Movement," 1999, Paper #167; Anita S. Cutting, "C. Bette Wimbish and Her Stand for Equality," Paper #104; and Glenda M. Alvin, "An Oral History of the African-American Experience in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1950-1960," 1991, Paper #131.

collections, including the papers of LeRoy Collins (Florida's governor from 1955 until 1961) and Herbert S. Phillips (a judge and attorney who supported segregation).

The Nelson Poynter Memorial Library at USF St. Petersburg possesses a variety of collections that also may be of interest to researchers of St. Petersburg's African-American heritage. Ernest Ponder came to St. Petersburg in 1924 as a young child. As a longtime teacher at Gibbs and Lakewood high schools, he taught generations of students about the contributions of African Americans and compiled a variety of resources. Some of these materials, including "A Panoramic Glimpse of Black History in St. Petersburg," became part of a permanent archive at the library. The Papers of Norman E. Jones, Sr., present a conservative voice in St. Petersburg's black community. Jones, a journalist who wrote a "Let's Talk Politics" column for nearly twenty years, believed that integration would have the unintended consequence of weakening African-American businesses and institutions. He also became a strong supporter of George Wallace's run for President at a time when many blacks condemned Wallace. Ruth MacLennan Uphaus recently donated the records of Amity House, her home in the Lakewood neighborhood that became a frequent gathering place for civil rights activists from the 1960s through the 1990s. The Amity House materials include scrapbooks documenting the 1968 strike by city sanitation workers, records of various human rights organizations, and extensive correspondence files.<sup>11</sup>

Urban growth, suburban sprawl, and demographic changes have reshaped the city's traditional African-American neighborhoods and institutions during the last forty years. By the early 1960s, blacks began to move into many residential areas where customs, deed restrictions, and city ordinances had once prevented them from living. Bartlett Park, a subdivision south of downtown St. Petersburg and west of Bayboro Harbor, became an area where African Americans moved to by the 1960s and early 1970s. To document this transformation, Eric Chrisp engaged in a series of oral history interviews and community research projects similar to the excellent work done by Sue Goldman in the Baskins, Dansville, and Ridgecrest communities near Largo. Along with other students and faculty in USF's anthropology program, Chrisp developed *Bus to Destiny: The Olive B. McLin Community History Project*. As blacks moved into new developments and integrated neighborhoods, many important venues from the days of forced segregation faced hard times. The Mercy Hospital, the Manhattan Casino, and many businesses along Twenty-Second Street South (also known as "The Deuces," the "Central Avenue" of the black community) went out of business.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For another source describing the 1968 sanitation strike, see the following paper in the Florida History Research Collection, Poynter Library: Richard Lally, "The Making of a Crisis: The St. Petersburg Sanitation Strike of 1968 and Its Aftermath," 1999, Paper #168.

<sup>12</sup> Eric F. Chrisp, "The Power of the Past in Community Development: Coordination of a Community History Project in St. Petersburg, Florida," (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 2000); *Bus to Destiny: The Olive B. McLin Community History Project*, available electronically at: <http://www.nelson.usf.edu/mclin>. The City of St. Petersburg's television channel, WSPF-TV (Channel 35), produced a twenty-two minute award winning documentary entitled "Remembering the Manhattan Casino" that recaptures the excitement of the bands that once played at that venue.

Infrastructure improvements and St. Petersburg's long quest for a Major League Baseball franchise have also exacted their toll on African-American institutions. Samuel Davis's excellent research on "Interstate 275 and the Black Community of St. Petersburg" described how the construction of this important highway bisected the black community. The Gas Plant neighborhood, an area of homes, churches, and small businesses, once occupied land between First and Fifth avenues South, and Tenth and Sixteenth streets. When county officials selected the Gas Plant area as the site for the Florida Suncoast Dome (now Tropicana Field), an entire neighborhood had to be relocated. The Laurel Park housing complex on the western side of Sixteenth Street also disappeared. Though many structures in the Gas Plant area were in poor condition by the early 1980s, the paving over of the entire neighborhood has left few signs of a once-vibrant area. Fortunately, Herman H. Prothro, a faculty member at the University of North Florida who spent his childhood years living in the shadow of the large Gas Plant building, has written some of his memories in *12 Lincoln Court*. Prothro described his youth in the 1940s and 1950s, with tales and anecdotes that mention his teachers and preachers, as well as the "neighborhood drunk."<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary commentaries and present-day directories will also reap rewards for future researchers. For example, Bill Maxwell's collected articles in *Maximum Insight*—compiled from his writings while at the *St. Petersburg Times*—document the controversies and challenges facing St. Petersburg's residents during the late twentieth century. The creation of a telephone directory known as the *Tampa-St. Petersburg Black Pages* during the early 1990s will give future historians and genealogists another source to consult as they look at events during our lifetime. Finally, oral history interviews and a growing body of electronic resources continue to build upon the scholarly foundation established by our predecessors.<sup>14</sup>

The author hopes that this bibliographic essay, though far from complete, will assist present and future researchers who hope to learn about the rich African-American traditions of the lower Pinellas Peninsula.

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Davis, "Interstate 275 and the Black Community of St. Petersburg," (Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of South Florida, ca. 1986); Herman H. Prothro, *12 Lincoln Court* (Bloomington, IN: 1<sup>st</sup> Books, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Bill Maxwell, *Maximum Insight: Selected Columns* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).